

Accountability

SPECIAL SECTION

Pathologies of Governance Reform: Promises, Pervasions and Perversions in the Age of Accountability

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We live in the Age of Accountability—or at the least that is what it feels like if you are engaged in or subject to any form of management, and that includes a growing number of us in the public, private and nonprofit sectors.

It seems that in almost every aspect of our lives—from family life and schooling to corporate governance and public administration—we are subjected to ever greater demands for accountability. We are also increasingly likely to demand more accountability from those we deal with—from our kids to the public servants and managers of the corporations that now permeate our lives.

What is driving this growing pervasive preoccupation with accountability is the belief that account giving—that is, the demand for more reporting, measuring, excuse-offering and justification-making behavior—is the best means through which to satisfy some of our most cherished objectives as members of an open, modern globalized society.

We believe in the capacity of accountability to deliver justice in the form of satisfying needs of victims to hear the confessions of their abusers. We are convinced that accountability in the form of transparency is the secret to democracy, or that by insisting on adherence to explicit rules and codes of behavior we can make our elected and corporate officials more ethical.

Most relevant to those of us concerned with the work of the public sector is the pervasive—almost obsessive—belief that through greater accountability we will enhance the performance, productivity and value of that broad range of goods and services for which government is responsible. We believe that through various account giving mechanisms our streets will be cleaner and safer, our children better educated, our health care more cost effective, our social services more efficient, our city services less costly, and even our highway traffic more tolerable and less dangerous.

What I find interesting and most disturbing in all this, is that we have come to the Age of Accountability relying so much on blind commitment to untested assumptions...

Collectively, I call these the “promises of accountability” and they are central to this new Age of Accountability.

What is significant about the current obsession with accountability is not the promises it has generated, but the fact that they are rooted in beliefs—strongly held beliefs, but beliefs nonetheless—and little more. What I find interesting and most disturbing in all this, is that we have come to the Age of Accountability relying so much on blind commitment to untested assumptions, and so little on our proven capacity to inform ourselves of the nature and implications of our choices. Our decision to rely on powerful beliefs rather than knowledge is all the more frustrating because it is endangering the very foundations of modern governance that we are intent on improving.

This call for greater knowledge about the promises of accountability will be met with skepticism in political, administrative and corporate circles where the belief in those promises is deeply and firmly rooted. It is the “conventional wisdom”, the “common sense” of today’s approach to management.

That said, such a commitment to an unframed and untested set of beliefs is unwise at best, for these promises have proven dangerously powerful when put in action and can generate costly consequences, not merely in terms of time and other wasted resources, but in the distortions and perverse behavior they produce.

My intent is not to challenge or question the basic relevance of accountability to governance. Quite the contrary, my argument is premised on the observation that accountability is in fact a core—if not THE CORE—defining characteristic of modern governance. But not all forms of accountability are alike, and the accountability of governance is not the same as the accountability of managerialism which is the subject of my criticism.

To understand the difference, we have to start with the basic fact that accountability is the expectation that an individual will be able to give an account of her or his actions or choices. Account giving is a relatively simple idea—it involves excuse-making, justification, explaining oneself, offering a rationalization, and so on. It is quite simply the capacity and ability to give an account.

But where accountabilities differ is in the way they become manifest in the behavior of the accountable individual. The accountability of governance—the good form of accountability—is an embedded and internalized commitment to account giving. It is embedded in the very relationships that the individual has with those she serves, or the clientele group he works with.

It is found in the way a third grade teacher relates to his students, or the obligation a firefighter feels to those who might be trapped in a burning building. It is internalized to the extent that the account giver regards the commitment to accountability to come from within and not be a reaction to some outside pressure.

The accountability of managerialism, in contrast, is imposed on those same relationships rather than embedded in them. It tells that third grade teacher that his relationship with his students must be defined in terms of higher test scores. It assesses the firefighters’ performance on the basis of measureables such as emergency response times. And in both instances the account giver does not take personal ownership of those standards—they are never internalized, but remain associated with the outside source.

I have no quarrel with the accountability of governance—in fact, I believe that it is being sacrificed on the altar of the new managerialist accountability and the false promises that support it.

As with most false beliefs, the promises of accountability are reflected in errors of commission and omission. I have already drawn attention to the major error of commission—the strong belief in the validity of accountability and those highly desirable conditions it supposedly fosters. The strength of this “strong belief error” is in part due to its simplicity. In all four cases, one can think of the promise as a simple input-output model: in goes accountability, out the other end comes justice/democracy/ethics/performance. Beautifully simple—to a fault!

A second error of commission is the “tautology error” and is uncovered when you begin to examine both sides of that input-output relationship very carefully. Justice, which has traditionally been based on assessments of outcomes (such as “is there a fair and just distribution of resources” or has the victim achieved retribution), is reduced in this case to account giving in the form of confessionals or declarations of one’s role in a previous unjust regime. Democracy, once tied to majority rule, minority rights and deliberation, is transformed to transparency, openness and answerability.

Ethical behavior, once linked to the achievement of happiness through reflection, is converted to restraints and compliance with articulated codes and rules. Performance, which once encompassed competencies and craftsmanship, is now reduced to measurable outcomes.

In each instance the ends have been transmuted into something narrower or different in order to retrofit them with the promise of accountability.

The third error of commission—which I term the “human nature error”—is as old as modern management theory itself. Think of the assumptions about human nature inherent in Frederick Taylor’s scientific management and its view of the human resource factor as just another part of the well engineered operation.

While this error met its empirical match in the human relations research of the 1920s, it hangs on as a convenient bit of folk wisdom that underpins much of today’s administrative reform. At its worst, this Theory X view of human nature—and its equally simplistic Theory Y and Theory Z companions—reflects a one-dimensional view of those being held accountable.

At its best, in the hands of some careful analysts, it can represent sophisticated models of human behavior that have been reduced to their bare bones in order to facilitate the design of reforms. Most often, assumptions about human nature are rarely posited critically or made subject to empirical testing. Often when a reform fails to deliver, the blame is shifted to the uncooperative or rebellious human factor.

As for errors of omission, I think there are two that, if resolved, would offset the damage done by all the other problems. The “unframed assertion error” is basic—there is no theoretical frame within which to understand how the promised relationships operate.

Returning to our input-output model, what we have between accountability and performance, for example, is a “black box” that somehow transforms accountability into more productive activity.

There is little, if any, attention paid by proponents of administrative reform to what goes on in that black box, and when we try to get some insight what we find is a clear indication of those one-dimensional assumptions about human nature that I spoke of earlier. In short, when we base our administrative policies on these promises, we are flying on “a wing and a prayer”, if that.

The second error of omission is the lack of a valid testing protocol for any of the promised relationships. Yes, there are efforts made to assess various accountability-based reforms, but if you look carefully at what is being evaluated you find that we are measuring compliance with requirements of reform rather than whether the reform has actually helped us

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improve performance, enhance justice, and so on. And given the tautological nature of the promises—that is, that each promised outcome was modified to fit into the input-output scheme—we are unlikely to get a valid assessment of any of these reform efforts in the current unframed context. In short, under current protocols for assessing the various accountability-based reform efforts, we are locked into a game of self-fulfilling false prophecies.

So much for the logical flaws among the promises of accountability. Among those who are not quite convinced by such arguments, let me turn to the more fundamental issue that is expressed in the title of my talk—that is, under the promises of accountability, well intended reforms have become pathological in two ways. First, by placing much of our limited resources into the input (accountability) side of the equation, we are diverting critical resources and attention away from the desired objective.

This creates what I term the paradox of accountability: the more we invest in accountability, the less we are able to actually accomplish. Second, there is growing evidence that these reforms are creating incentives for perverse behaviors by those being held accountable as they attempt to avoid the negative consequences they might result from poor performance.

What is to be done?

Make what contributions you can to

developing a better theoretical understanding of accountability and its role in governance and administration. This may sound like an academic's special plea to his colleagues, but it is more than that.

Designing effective policies and programs requires more practical knowledge rather than stronger beliefs, and if there is something that we social scientists know all too well it is that useful knowledge comes from the development and testing of theories under real world conditions.

And for those who might believe that theoretical work is only for academics, the history of public administration and management indicates otherwise.

Perhaps the most influential work in public management theory of the past century was authored a little over six decades ago by Chester Barnard, a highly respected public and private sector executive in the United States who was invited to Harvard to offer his thoughts on management in the mid 1930s. Barnard's work inspired at least one young scholar at the time to develop his insights even further, and the result was the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Economics to Herbert Simon four decades later.

If that is the payoff from listening to our practitioner friends, we academics will certainly be "all ears."

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